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Statement

by

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of the

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of the United Nations

on the occasion of

World Food Day

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Mr President of the General Assembly,
Mr Secretary-General,
Mr President of the Economic and Social Council,
Mr Chairman of the US House Committee on Agriculture,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

Why have we chosen to talk about food for the future? In a world where five hundred million people go hungry, would it not be better to think first about food for today? If we concentrate on how to meet food needs for several generations ahead, are we not neglecting the man who suffers from hunger now and can barely provide his own family with their daily bread?

This contradiction, though, is not a real one because, if we are to guard against future food problems, we must of course

start by solving those of today. The present situation is tragic, and we are making every possible effort to put it right. But the theme chosen for World Food Day 1990 enables us to see these endeavours in the right perspective, in that no action undertaken to feed our contemporaries must compromise our descendants' chances of survival.

Sustainable development

Human activity – particularly agriculture, which man hit upon as a way of feeding himself – is not just a question of space, but also of time. Growing crops means looking ahead, making arrangements for the future, and woe betide anyone who forgets this basic truth. For example, hillside deforestation not only involves erosion and run-off down the treeless slopes; by seriously disturbing the hydrologic regime, it also threatens agriculture in the fertile areas below. Similarly, when small farmers, driven by poverty, exploit increasingly poor soil to the point of exhaustion, the disastrous effects of these practices will be felt later on.

From past generations we have already inherited a surfeit of denuded land and man-made desert which will never again yield food and, in our own times as well, man's destruction of the world's natural resources has increased at an appalling rate. Desertification is spreading like leprosy to land we once knew as fertile. Deforestation eats up seventeen million hectares of tropical forest a year; then there are the ravages of floods and long periods of drought, and the overexploitation of soils left defenceless to erosion by wind or water. Through the blind greed of some people and the desperate poverty of others, the baneful dynamics of bad management of natural resources are at work – observable, documented, undeniable. As the century

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draws to a close, this is no longer a threat but a terrible reality. Unless the trend is reversed, we shall not survive. This is the fundamental concern which underlies the notion of *sustainable* development; it is this new requirement, now better understood by the international community, that shapes and colours the theme we are discussing today.

I am emphasizing the ravages of a misused environment in the countries of the South, of course; but surely we should also give some thought to the role played in this respect by the economic development of the countries of the North? Over the centuries, the temperate regions too have been stripped of their forest cover to make way for fields and pastures and to supply their towns and their budding industries with timber and fuelwood. The global risks inherent in deforestation cannot therefore be laid exclusively at the door of the people who want to take today the path followed by others in the past.

To speak of the future: the greenhouse effect, a by-product of energy consumption concentrated mainly in the developed countries, may well have incalculable climatic consequences. It is still not clear what form these will take or where they will strike, but their uneven and transcontinental distribution means that they will inevitably hit some populations that are in no way responsible for them. The international community should perhaps be prepared to underwrite these risks collectively.

Interdependence and food security

We also need to think in terms of an interdependent world, where solidarity between rich and poor, North and South, is seen as both a practical necessity and a moral obligation. Thirty years ago one of my predecessors, B.R. Sen, the father of the Freedom

from Hunger Campaign, defined one man's hunger as every man's hunger. This moral principle also reflects political realism; we realize now that the security of the very rich – including their food security – will become more and more precarious unless something is done soon to remedy the plight of the very poor.

The World Food Security Compact adopted by the FAO Conference in 1985 sets out this truth in strong and simple words: "No one can remain indifferent to the fate of those whose daily food is insecure." It invites all nations to react accordingly, which means in particular that they must "recognise the moral dimension in trade relations with a view to striking an equitable balance between domestic interests and the good of the world as a whole". At the same time, however, the Compact makes an urgent appeal to personal commitment; each individual has "a sacred obligation to concern himself with the food security of those less fortunate than himself". And the text ends with these words which still echo today: "The enemy is indifference."

Sustainable development, through interdependence and solidarity, can ensure food security for today and tomorrow; this is the theme of World Food Day this year.

Outlook

What are the prospects of achieving this objective?

What will be humanity's needs in 15 or 20 years' time? Will there be enough food to meet them? Above all, will it be possible to share out supplies among countries and population groups and thus put an end to the scandal of famine appearing

side by side with plenty? FAO is constantly poring over and clarifying these fundamental and intricate questions. And this is what we find.

Although today the earth is producing more than enough to feed its entire population, there are still more than 500 million undernourished people, and there would be even more without food aid. The cause of this situation is poverty, and our future depends on the extent of future poverty. From now until the end of the century there will be one thousand million new mouths to feed. Every three seconds, one more mouth, for at least several decades; this is the irreversible population explosion. But the challenge of these figures could still be met, if sufficient production on one part of the planet were enough to ensure that everyone everywhere could eat their fill. While it is hoped that production will expand as fast as population and will therefore be globally sufficient, if the poor remain poor the increase in effective demand will fail to keep pace with increasing food needs. Furthermore, the rate of population growth is always highest among the poor, so if policies remain unchanged, if the amount of aid is not increased, and if international solidarity fails to play a more decisive role, the ranks of the malnourished will inevitably swell.

Developing food production in poor countries as well as their capacity to trade other commodities for food; reinforcing their storage, transport and distribution facilities and making food physically and economically accessible to all; promoting the trading and financial relations on which food security rests: this is the programme to which we must devote our every effort – and perhaps a fraction of our military budgets.

Will we be able to mobilize the political will and the resources to stimulate agricultural production in the Third

World? Will the inputs – fertilizers, pesticides and equipment – that would attack the immediate causes of stagnating yields be made available, as FAO has suggested? Will we be able to make food aid, which is obviously indispensable but which can be counter-productive if administered without due precautions, act as a stimulus to national development and food security efforts, perhaps by the increase in trade among countries of the South through the type of international financing now known as triangular transactions? I hope so, and I should like to be convinced, but there is still a long way to go before our solidarity measures up to the challenge of poverty.

Here is an example to illustrate this fear. At present one cause of poverty in some countries is the worsening terms of trade due to the chronic slump in the prices of their raw materials. These prices must therefore be raised. Some people, however, say that the economic health of developed countries requires a reduction in inflation, and that a rise in the cost of raw materials would inevitably have the opposite effect. In fact, the influence of a reasonable rise on inflation would no doubt be marginal, but what seems most serious to me is the shortsightedness of this attitude with regard to the poor and to the solidarity we owe them.

Food in the future

Production

Another aspect of this future we are talking about is what tomorrow's food will be made up of.

Human ingenuity has increased yields and improved plant and animal varieties through science and technology and has

obtained spectacular results; if agriculture easily produces enough to feed all mankind, it is largely due to technical progress. But this is not without its perils, as we realize today that excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides or animal growth stimulants is nothing less than doping. It combines with industrial pollution to poison land, water, plants and livestock – and therefore our food. Both food and health are also threatened by dangers of a non-agricultural origin. The Chernobyl disaster, fresh in all our memories, is still wreaking havoc in the world, since radionuclides not only affect human beings directly but also contaminate food and land, ruling out crop or livestock production for a long time to come. Preserving the wholesomeness of tomorrow's food is now seen as an imperative task calling for both vigilance and imagination.

Processing

Modern industry brings an impressive technical and scientific arsenal to bear in the preparation and processing of food once the farmer's work is done. Three-quarters of the food eaten in developed countries has probably undergone extensive industrial processing. Bowing to economic pressures, a plethora of additives such as stabilizers, preservatives and colours has been incorporated into our food, denaturing it. Even the plainest foods such as bread and rice are no longer what they once were.

This is a disturbing trend. We seem to be playing the sorcerer's apprentice, slipping substances into our food which may well damage our health, create new sources of disease, alter our anatomy – and even our minds. Technical innovations are essential, of course, but so are safeguards.

Codex Alimentarius

FAO and WHO long ago decided to take action to ensure food safety by preparing and enacting legally binding standards. In 1961, the two organizations jointly launched an extensive Food Standards Programme within the framework of the *Codex Alimentarius*. The Codex Alimentarius Commission, with 135 Member States, sets international standards, prepares codes concerning the handling of various foods and recommends maximum safe levels for certain ingredients, particularly food additives. This work on standards benefits both producers and consumers. While laws may well be needed to ensure that our health is not undermined or our bodies slowly poisoned by the food we eat, in the final analysis such laws are also in the interest of the food industries. This is why we work in cooperation with these industries; food controls must be an adjunct to economic activity, not an obstacle. We bear this consideration constantly in mind in helping developing countries to set up regulatory and legislative systems to ensure effective food controls and to guarantee food quality.

International Conference on Nutrition

Oddly enough, no major international conference has ever taken nutrition as its topic, despite the universally acknowledged importance of a wholesome, balanced and adequate diet, the decisive influence of nutrition on health and disease, and trade structures which make this a world issue. In addition to the very useful expert consultations, it would seem to be in the interest of governments to meet and to share their experiences, concerns and analyses, to voice their views and needs, and to lay the groundwork for joint action which would benefit mankind as a whole and facilitate trade as well. FAO has therefore undertaken,

together with WHO and in cooperation with other appropriate agencies, to organize a major International Conference on Nutrition. We have great expectations for this important meeting which is to be held in Rome in December 1992.

"Eating to live"

We should not, however, confine our discussion to the possibility of meeting our future food requirements through an adequate and balanced intake of safe foods. There is another dimension to food that I should like to touch upon briefly in conclusion. Our work and our sessions could easily make us forget that food does more than just sustain us; it is also an essential facet of our culture and of our way of life. Food should not simply be nourishing and wholesome, it should also be *good*, and a source of joy.

The wisdom of the ages tells us that "we must eat to live and not live to eat". But what should we understand by "eat to live"? If we interpret this to mean simply taking in enough calories, proteins, vitamins and so forth to make our minds and bodies work properly, we leave out one very fundamental aspect. Food is an integral part of our family, social and even spiritual lives, and of our relations with others.

Culinary traditions, a talent for cooking, and the love that a man or woman puts into the preparation of that special dish that no one else makes so well are inexpressibly important in terms of keeping a family together. The ceremonies which mark the major rites of passage – birth, coming of age, weddings and funerals – have always provided an occasion for family meals in which warmth, reconciliation and the reaffirmation of family ties are part of the celebration.

Unity among the most diverse kinds of professional and social associations and groups is also reinforced and consolidated around the table. Just as a family party may take the form of a festive meal, reunions of former students, colleagues, athletes – even Platonic philosophers – call for a banquet. The special cuisine of a province or nation is a unique expression of its own civilization. There is a word which admirably expresses the way food warms and strengthens human relationships: "conviviality".

On a deeper level, food has a sacred side. There is probably no religion without some ritual food. Enshrouded in mystery, the partaking of sacred foods is equally important as a bridge to spirituality and as communion with the deity. The expression "eat to live" thus takes on a meaning which includes the material, social and spiritual dimensions of mankind.

Conclusion

Tomorrow's agriculture must respect and protect the environment if it is to ensure man's future survival. And tomorrow's food must fully embody the human dimension I have just described.

Production, in sufficient quantity and quality, is unquestionably necessary, and supplies must be distributed equitably so that all may have a share. But if food should cease to provide a special occasion for dialogue and celebration, it would certainly lose part of its value and meaning.